

**According to Browning, “War is the most conducive environment in which governments can adopt ‘atrocities by policy’ and encounter few difficulties in implementing it (162).”**

**How does Browning show this to be so for German representatives on the eastern front during the Second World War?**

The Second World War bore witness to some of the most horrific atrocities in human history, with the extermination of six million Jews being among the most gruesome of them all. In his detailed analysis of the war in *Ordinary Men*, Christopher Browning proposes that such a volatile environment offered a conducive platform for governments to institute their "atrocities by policy" with fewer hindrances (162). Browning argues that through strategic deployment of the Judeo-Bolshevik threat narrative, coupled with systematic humiliation and mechanization of killing, the Nazi regime successfully detached soldiers from the heinous reality of their deeds. Concurrently, a pressure-cooker environment of intense peer influence, strong authoritative directives, and alcohol-fueled thought suppression pushed soldiers towards renouncing their critical thinking. This milieu made it convenient for soldiers to adapt, conform, and obey orders, enabling the Nazi regime to execute its horrific policy of atrocity with a disturbing ease amidst the tumult of war.

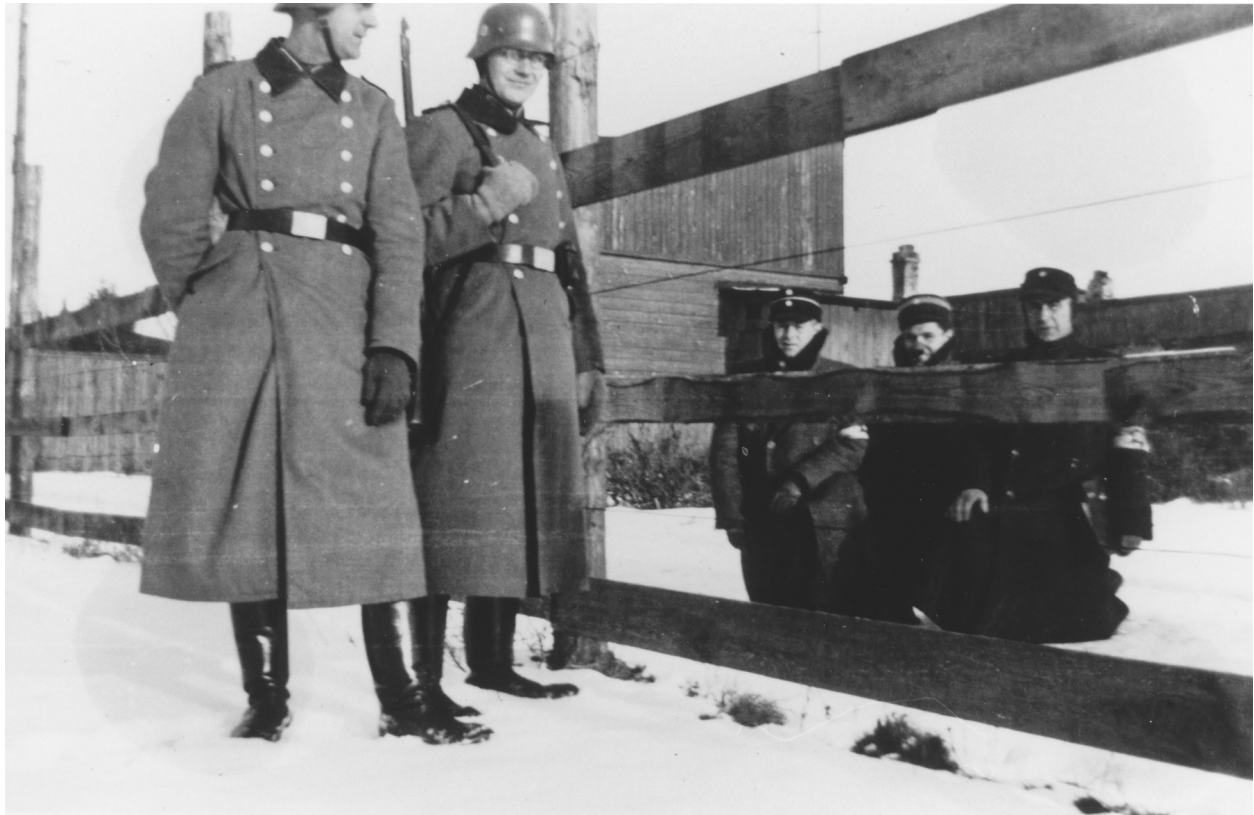
Browning's exploration of World War II and Nazi policy uncovers how it facilitated the extreme dehumanization, vilification, and humiliation of Jews. The climate of war provided fertile grounds for the Nazis to propagate an imminent Judeo-Bolshevik threat, effectively positioning Jews and Soviets as enemies. Browning underscores the "mutually intensifying effects of war and racism," suggesting that such an environment reinforced the German perpetrators' perception of racial superiority and eliminated any semblance of common humanity with their Jewish victims (Browning 186). The lasting impact of this propaganda is evident in

post-war interrogations that occurred twenty-five years later, where soldiers claimed they could identify Jews because they were “dirty,” “unkempt,” and “less clean” than the Poles (Browning 151). In an effort to further distance the executioners from their victims, Jews were subjected to extreme humiliation and dehumanization prior to their deaths, often being forced to undress, surrender their possessions, and lie atop a growing pile of corpses before being shot (Browning 140). Browning also illustrates how the Nazis converted the process of killing into a mechanized operation, allocating different tasks among soldiers and outsourcing the act of killing to “specialists.” This division of labor created an illusion of detachment from the atrocities committed, reducing each soldier to a tiny cog in the machine, devoid of personal responsibility (Browning 166). Amid the dehumanization of Jews, facilitated by the orchestrated Judeo-Bolshevik threat narrative, the systematic humiliation preceding their execution, and the mechanization of the killing process through labor division, soldiers could effectively disconnect themselves from the horrific reality of their actions, thus becoming oblivious to the inhumanity of their deeds.

In addition to manipulating the perception of Jews, the Nazi regime capitalized on the wartime context to exert pressure on soldiers to conform and to suppress critical thinking through alcohol and authoritarian orders. Browning highlights that though the battalion as a collective had orders to kill Jews, individual soldiers were not bound by these orders. Yet, the prospect of breaking ranks and being ostracized by their peers compelled many to participate in the atrocities (Browning 184). Those who refrained from shooting could be perceived as morally reprimanding and as leaving the “dirty work” to their comrades, thereby risking isolation and rejection (Browning 65). Browning also invokes the studies of Stanley Milgram to demonstrate the powerful influence of authority on individual behavior. Milgram's experiments revealed that

two-thirds of participants were willing to inflict extreme pain on others when directed by an authority figure, even without any external coercive threat (Browning 174). Browning notes that the pressure exerted on the soldiers of the Third Reich was even more potent given the consequences of disobedience in a police state. The regime further stifled critical thinking and eased psychological burdens by supplying soldiers with alcohol post-killings (Browning 60). In this climate of intense peer pressure, authoritative commands, and alcohol-induced inhibition, it became easier for soldiers to suspend critical thinking, conform, and execute orders.

**Critically analyze this historical photograph from 1940 featuring two members of Police Battalion 101 and three imprisoned Jewish policemen in the ghetto of Lodz. What can you learn from this primary source about German attitudes towards violence and warfare, and/or the plight of the Nazis' perceived enemies?**



The 1940 photograph from the Lodz ghetto depicts the Police Battalion 101's attitudes towards Jewish policemen, highlighting a stark power imbalance and dehumanization. Despite their law enforcement roles, the Jewish policemen are subjected to humiliation due to their ethnicity. This image vividly demonstrates the deep-seated dichotomy between the “Aryan” Germans and their oppressed Jewish counterparts, revealing the normalized and systematic cruelty that marked Nazi Germany.

A notable feature of this image is the contrasting postures and attire of the Police Battalion 101 members and the Jewish policemen. The former's confident stance and different uniforms underline their oppressive dominance, while the latter, kneeling and submissive, visually encapsulate their daily dehumanization and subjugation. These physical differences facilitated the depersonalization of Nazi enemies, creating a clear divide between the perpetrators of violence and its victims. Further emphasizing this division, the fence between the two groups not only represents a physical boundary but a psychological one as well, enhancing the dehumanization process. It underscores the Nazis' perceived superiority and the Jews' inferiority, mirroring the Nazi regime's core tenets of “race and space” – this photo is a microcosm of the Nazi regime using the war as a means to seek domination and the spread of “Aryan” control. These distinctions in clothing, positioning, and segregation fortify the boundaries between the Nazis and Jews, implicitly endorsing the violence and warfare of the period.

The photograph's mundane setting highlights the normalization of Jewish humiliation, indicating that such degrading acts were not confined to battlefields or concentration camps but integrated into the everyday life of Nazi-occupied territories. This image affirms the successful execution of Nazi strategies to use ghettos to make separating, humiliating, and exploiting Jewish residents a daily norm. It also offers insights into the more brutal nature of the Eastern Front war due to higher Jewish populations and the perceived Judeo-Bolshevik threat. The photograph underscores the power dynamics prevalent in Nazi-occupied territories, showing how violence, warfare, and enemy perception were manipulated and normalized, with the subjugation of Jews becoming a routine activity.

## **References**

Christopher Browning, Ordinary Men, pages 1-78, 133-191.

Sarah Stein, "Ghettoization, Deportations, and Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe," HIST 5  
(lecture, UCLA, 2023)

NAZISM - GERMANY (1933-1945) -- Police/Security Organizations -- Police Battalion 101.

Lodz, Poland, 1940.